Guidelines for the Integration of Student Projects into ESP Classrooms

By Ken Sheppard and Fredricka L. Stoller

Interest in project work and its integration into second and foreign language (L2) instruction is growing around the world; the interest stems in part from the work of Fried-Booth (1982, 1986), Legutke and Thiel (1983), and Haines (1989). The approach is particularly effective in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings because it easily lends itself to: *a* . authentic language use, *b* . a focus on language at the discourse rather than the sentence level, *c* . authentic tasks, and *d* . learner centeredness, all characteristics of ESP (Robinson, 1991). Most importantly, project work leads to purposeful language use because it requires personal involvement on the part of the students: from the onset of a project, students, in consultation with their instructor, must decide "what they will do and how they will do it, and this includes not only the content of the project, but also the language requirements" (Fried-Booth, 1986:5). In what follows, we outline fundamental steps for project work and illustrate how to translate those steps into practice by reporting on one effort to promote project work in a business English classroom.

What is Project Work?

Project work involves multi-skill activities which focus on a theme of interest rather than specific language tasks (Haines 1989). In project work, students work together to achieve a common purpose, a concrete outcome (e.g., a brochure, a written report, a bulletin board display, a video, an article for a school newspaper, etc.). Haines identifies four types of projects: information and research projects, survey projects, production projects, and performance/organizational projects. What these different types of projects have in common is their emphasis on student involvement, collaboration, and responsibility. In this respect, project work is similar to the cooperative learning and task-oriented activities that are widely endorsed by educators interested in building communicative competence and purposeful language learning. It differs from such approaches, however, in that it typically requires students to work together over several days or weeks, both inside and outside the classroom, often in collaboration with speakers of the target language who are not normally part of the educational process.

Students in tourism, for example, might decide to generate a formal report comparing modes of transportation; those in hotel/restaurant management might develop travel itineraries. In both projects, students might create survey questionnaires; conduct interviews; compile, sort, analyze, and summarize survey data; and prepare oral presentations or written reports to present their final product. In the process, they would use the target language in a variety of ways: they would talk to each other, read about the focal point of their project, write survey questionnaires, and listen carefully to those whom they interview. As a result, all of the skills they are trying to master would come into play in a natural way.

Consider, for example, the production of a travel brochure. To do this task, tourism students would first have to identify a destination, in their own country or abroad, and then contact tourist agencies for information about the location, including transportation, accommodations in all price ranges, museums and other points of interest, and maps of the region. They would then design their brochure by designating the intended audience, deciding on an appropriate length for their suggested itinerary, reviewing brochures for comparable sites, selecting illustrations, etc. Once the drafting had begun, they could exchange material, evaluate it, and gradually improve it in the light of criteria they establish. Finally, they would put the brochure into production, and the outcome would be a finished product, an actual brochure in a promotional style.

Project Work and ESP

In the spring of 1994, the authors were invited by the Italian Ministry of Education and the United States Information Service (USIS) to present a series of workshops on the project approach for English teachers from vocational high schools in Italy. (see Footnote 1 below) The teachers were from all parts of the country and worked with students in a wide variety of vocational areas: social services and child care, electronics, catering, agriculture, telecommunications, dental technology, computer science, tourism, and even stonecutting. They were all ESP teachers, though the instructional approaches of their schools varied considerably from discipline to discipline. In general, courses for students in technical fields such as telecommunications stressed technical reading, while courses in less technical fields such as tourism favored interpersonal communication. All of the teachers were competent, enthusiastic, and committed, but most shared the frustrations of teachers everywhere with schedules, curricula, and textbooks that expose students to content in uninteresting and non-communicative ways. Most of the teachers were interested in exploring new techniques for expanding textbook activities to create a more communicative and stimulating learning environment.

We discovered, by means of an informal needs assessment, that the majority of ESP students, whether they were in computer science or child care, needed more experience in listening to and speaking English. Students of electronics, for example, had little difficulty with technical reading, in part because they understood the context and were familiar with key underlying concepts, and also because they recognized cognates. They had a lot of trouble, however, talking to English speakers about technical material and their technical work.

Since Italy is a member of the European Union, and the world's economy is increasingly integrated, the long-term prospect was that they would also have to communicate informally with native and non-native speakers about non-technical topics. Students and teachers alike realized that poring over written manuals and textbook material on such subjects as computer architecture, circuitry, and the like, would not help students improve their proficiency in social discourse. Therefore, the immediate priority was to provide meaningful practice in realistic situations.

Thus, project work had a strong appeal. Not only does it put students in touch with speakers of the target language; it also creates a need to communicate, an information gap. Once attention is

off linguistic forms and *on* the task to be accomplished, students begin to pool their resources to make themselves understood and to understand their interlocutors. On the cognitive level, they are required to search and sort their knowledge of the language and rapidly process input in order to make use of what they know in real time. If topics and tasks can be identified that require real communication in vocationally appropriate contexts around relevant subject matter, then the learning process is aligned more closely with students' long-term communicative needs.

Developing a Project

Although recommendations as to the best way to develop projects in the classroom vary (Fried-Booth, 1986; Haines, 1989; Katz & Chard, 1993; Papandreou, 1994), most are consistent with the eight fundamental steps described below. Though the focus is upon the collaborative task, the various steps offer opportunities to build on the students' heightened awareness of the utility of the language by working directly on language in class. In short, language work arises naturally from the project itself, "developing cumulatively in response to a basic objective, namely, the project" (Booth-Fried, 1986:8). Strategically orchestrated lessons devoted to relevant elements of language capture students' attention because they have immediate applicability to their project work.

Step I: Define a theme. In collaboration with students, identify a theme that will amplify the students' understanding of an aspect of their future work and provide relevant language practice. In the process, teachers will also build interest and commitment. By pooling information, ideas, and experiences through discussion, questioning, and negotiation, the students will achieve consensus on the task ahead.

Step II: Determine the final outcome. Define the final outcome of the project (e.g., written report, brochure, debate, video) and its presentation (e.g., collective or individual). Agree on objectives for both content and language.

Step III: Structure the project. Collectively determine the steps that the students must take to reach the final outcome and agree upon a time frame.

Specifically, identify the information that they will need and the steps they must take to obtain it (e.g., library research, letters, interviews, faxes). Consider the authentic materials that the students can consult to enhance the project (e.g., advertisements from English magazines, travel brochures, menus in English, videos, etc.). Decide on each student's role and put the students into working groups. If they are not used to working together, they may need help in adapting to unsupervised collaboration. They may also be a little reluctant to speak English outside the classroom with strangers. (See Fried-Booth, 1986, and Haines, 1989, for "bridging activities" and "lead-in activities" which are designed to develop students' receptiveness to project work.)

Step IV: Identify language skills and strategies. There are times, during project work, when students are especially receptive to language skill and strategy practice. Consider students' skill

and strategy needs and integrate lessons into the curriculum that best prepare students for the language demands associated with Steps V, VI, and VII.

a. Identify the language skills (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening) which students will need to gather information for their project (Step V). For example: will they have to write letters? If so, are they familiar with the type of letter that is appropriate for their purposes? Will they interview native speakers? If so, will they need class sessions devoted to the language of inquiry and related functions (e.g., how to ask for clarification, or for repetition)? Should they practice the pronunciation of key words? Will they need help with intensive listening (i.e., listening to pick out key pieces of information from an authentic stream of input)? Would roleplays help? Or dictation? Do they need reading skills practice?

Similarly, identify strategies for gathering information. If students will secure information from aural input, show them how to create a grid for systematic data collection to facilitate retrieval for comparison and analysis.

b. Determine the skills and strategies that students will need to compile information that may have been gathered from several sources and/or by several student groups (Step VI). For example, they may have to read each other's notes, interpret visual materials (e.g., charts and grids), or listen to and take notes from taped interviews. Plan activities to prepare them for these tasks.

c. Identify the skills and strategies that students will need to present the final project to their peers, other classes, or the headmaster (Step VII). As they prepare their presentations, they may need to work on the language (written or spoken) of formal reporting.

Step V: Gather information. After students design instruments for data collection (e.g., questionnaires, surveys, interview questions, grids), have them gather information inside and outside the classroom, individually, in pairs, or in groups. It is important that students "regard the tracking down and collecting of resources as an integral part of their involvement" in the project (Haines 1989:11).

Step VI: Compile and analyze information. Working in groups or as a whole class, students should compile information they have gathered, compare their findings, and decide how to organize them for efficient presentation. During this step, students may proofread each other's work, cross-reference or verify it, and negotiate with each other for meaning.

Step VII: Present final product. Students will present the outcome of their project work as a culminating activity. The manner of presentation will largely depend on the final form of the product. It may involve the screening of a video; the staging of a debate; the submission of an article to the school newspaper or a written report to the headmaster; or the presentation of a brochure to a local tourist agency or hotel.

Step VIII: Evaluate the project. In this final phase of project work, students and teacher reflect on (1) the steps taken to accomplish their objectives and (2) the language, communicative skills, and information they have acquired in the process. They can discuss the value of their experience

and its relationship to future vocational needs. They can also identify aspects of the project which could be improved and/or enhanced in future attempts at project work.

A Sample Project

To illustrate how these generic steps can be translated into practice, we outline a project entitled "Purchasing a Computer," designed by two ESP teachers of business English in Italy. (See Footnote 2 below)

Step 1: Through discussion and possible negotiation, students agree on a theme for their project. They will compile and compare information about four computer models in order to recommend which system their school should purchase.

Step II: Students decide on the final outcome of their project: subgroups will make presentations to the class in which they report on the information they have gathered at a computer trade fair and recommend a purchase. The whole class will then decide which computer to buy. Together they will write a formal recommendation and submit it to the head administrator of their school.

Steps III, V, VI, and VII: The students will engage in the following activities while carrying out their project:

a. Students will review authentic advertisements and/or commercials promoting different computer models and brands that the teacher has collected from trade magazines, journals, computer stores, television, and radio. While examining the contents of these promotional materials, they will discover the criteria normally used in comparing computers.

b. Students will survey school personnel to determine how the new computer will be used. For example, they will inquire about such criteria as power, memory, portability, warranty, software compatibility, durability, delivery, maintenance, and cost.

c. Students will meet in small groups and decide how to obtain information about four computers on the market. For example, they may review trade magazines, write to companies to secure promotional material, contact computer outlets by telephone, etc. Then they will gather pertinent information.

d. Students will summarize the material they have accumulated on a grid such as the one shown below.

e. Students will review promotional material about a local computer trade fair and decide which exhibits to visit.

f. Students will visit the fair to interview salespeople and collect promotional material. They can record information on a grid like the one above, take photographs and/or tape-record interviews.

g. Students will meet in their groups and collate all of the information they have obtained. Groups will then meet in jigsaw fashion (i.e., in new groups made up of a representative from each original group) and query each other about what they have learned (using the blank grid as a basis for their questions).

h. Students will return to their original work groups in order to prepare an oral presentation that summarizes their findings and concludes with a recommendation for the purchase of a particular system. They will prepare a visual for this purpose (e.g., a bulletin board display, a poster, an overhead transparency, etc.). They may do some follow-up writing to support their points of view, if needed.

i. After listening to all group recommendations, the class will debate the merits of each computer model and decide on a class recommendation. A formal recommendation will be written and submitted to the school administration.

Step IV: In the process of completing the project, students may need to practice those language skills and strategies that they determined to be important at different stages of the project. Depending on student needs, lessons like those described below may be planned to provide students with language practice and support.

- *Students will participate in a teacher-centered question-and-answer activity in which the teacher asks them about the ads that s/he has collected. [See (a) above.]*
- *Students will read a passage that compares computer models with reference to particular specifications and optional components They will practice skimming and scanning for key information in this passage. They will complete a grid similar to the one above by locating the required information in the passage [An activity such as this can be completed between (b)and (c) above.]*
- *Students will write business letters of the type required to secure information from manufacturers about their products.[See (c) above.]*
- *Students will complete an intensive listening exercise in which they listen for key information about computers. [An activity such as this can be completed between (e) and (f)above.]*
- *Students will do a roleplay in pairs in which they impersonate a potential customer and a salesperson. The grid again provides a basis for the interaction. [An activity such as this can be completed between (e) and (f) above.]*
- *Students will practice question-formation in pairs to prepare for the jigsaw activity. [See (g) above.]*
- *Students will rehearse the formal presentation of a product comparison using a visual aid (e.g., a poster they have created to illustrate the features of each potential purchase). [See (h)above.]*
- *Students will draft a brief report in an appropriate register that summarizes their decision and supporting details.[See (h) and (i) above.]*

Step VIII: In a structured reflection session, the teacher and students will ex-post-facto enumerate the steps they completed, consider what they have achieved in the process (in terms of

language improvement and acquired content knowledge), discuss the problems they encountered, and identify areas that they need to pay more attention to in the future.

Rules of Thumb

To maximize the impact of project work in the ESP classroom, take a few rules of thumb into account.

First of all, always consider the students' long-term language needs. Though it may be difficult, try to identify the social and professional contexts that they will have to function in. Think of projects students can undertake that require them to use the language in a way that resembles their ultimate use.

Secondly, consider the linguistic skills that students will have to employ in these contexts. Will they, for example, have to record telephone messages? If so, projects that require practice in those skills would be most useful. If, on the other hand, students will have to manage a lot of fax traffic, the project's subsidiary tasks should involve those types of activity.

Thirdly, consider what is feasible. One popular project, widely discussed in Italy, involves querying travelers as they pass through an airport terminal or major train station.

Although an airport/train station is the ideal place to ask questions and to find English speakers to answer them, there may be no international airport or major train station at hand to use for this purpose. If this is the case, there is no point in insisting that students interview native speakers of English. At the same time, teachers should not abandon the idea of a project altogether if ideal circumstances are not available. Since most professional conversation in English is probably carried on among nonnative speakers, students will benefit equally from projects that put them in touch with speakers of varieties of world English. In addition, there are numerous sources of material in English that can be obtained at no cost with a formal letter of request and then sifted, compared, and summarized. In other words, do not give up simply because a pool of native speakers or authentic printed material is unavailable close to home.

Finally, do a lot of planning. Although the project approach requires student input and decision-making in the initial phase of project definition, the teacher's understanding of the outcome and the steps needed to achieve project objectives is crucial. Therefore, before introducing the project, the teacher should identify topics of possible interest, the educational value of the outcome, corresponding activities, and the students' material or cognitive needs in conducting the project. For example, will they need tape recorders or video recorders? Will they need additional work on language functions they have not yet mastered? Will they have enough time to complete the task? In short, planning is critical.

Caveats

Project work is not appropriate in all ESP settings. There are many schools where curricular demands, the lack of equipment, scheduling problems, issues of insurance, administrative rigidity, and the like preclude instructional innovations like project work.

Incorporating project work into more traditional classrooms requires careful orchestration and planning. Students who are not used to functioning autonomously, who may even be accustomed to close control and monitoring, may find it hard to take control of their own activity. Therefore, ease them into it by planning cooperative, small group work beforehand (see Fried-Booth, 1986 and Haines, 1989).

Similarly, many teachers encounter resistance from school administrators when they challenge the status quo with the project approach. Traditional schools that are governed by strict curricular guidelines and systematic testing are frequently not the most receptive environments for project work. Some administrators, for example, may complain that the elaborate activities associated with project work do not prepare students for required exams. Yet, if the underlying objective of an ESP program is to build the students' ability to use the language fluently in novel situations, project work will carry them a lot closer to meeting that objective than more conventional work on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Project work can only be effective when teachers relax control of their students temporarily and assume the role of guide or facilitator. The teacher can play an important role by diligently overseeing the multiple steps of project work, establishing guidelines, helping students make decisions, and providing instruction in the language when it is needed. Giving students freedom to immerse themselves in the project can lead to motivated and independent learners, but it requires a certain flexibility on the part of the instructor if students are to benefit maximally.

Conclusion

Though project work may not be the easiest instructional approach to implement, the potential payoffs are many. At the very least, with the project approach, ESP teachers can break with routine by spending a week or more doing something besides grammar drills and technical reading. It is likely that the benefits of project work will also include improved student motivation, students' enhanced awareness of their language needs, integrated skills practice, and, conceivably, a more stimulating and satisfying learning and teaching experience for students and teacher alike.

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Footnote 1

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Footnote 2

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